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Interwoven lives

Our physical, social and digital lives are all becoming increasingly complex, but also interwoven with one another. Emanating from the same individual, they yet have synchronous and asynchronous aspects.

Physical life is perhaps the most straightforward: conception is followed by birth, then at some point by death. In developed countries, death will most likely come in old age (Leadbeter and Garber 2010). The end of physical life is marked by a series of routine processes, including the issue of a death certificate, disposal of the body, and often a ceremony of farewell. There is a lack of precision over the moment when physical life starts and the moment when it ends, in the test-tube embryo awaiting selection for implantation, and in the brain-dead patient kept alive on life support.

The moment when human *social* life – one's social identity and interaction – begins is also imprecise. Does it begin when a mother first becomes aware of her pregnancy and feels a burgeoning connection with her unborn child, when a baby is born, or when a child makes her first friends? When does it end? Towards the end of physical life, social identity and social interaction can wither, leading ultimately to social death (Mulkay and Ernst 1991; Walter et al. 2012). Hastening of social death can be prompted by the onset of conditions with associated memory loss and personality changes, such as dementia, leading relatives and friends to mourn the loss of the person that they knew despite that person's continued physical existence (Sweeting and Gilhooly 1997). Conversely, social death may be delayed until long after physical death, as the bereaved maintain continuing bonds with the dead through private and public acts of remembrance (Klass et al. 1996).

What of our *digital* lives? How do they begin? While anchored in our offline physical and social lives, our digital lives may not always be in sync. Digital life may predate the landmark event of birth, in the form of digital ultrasound images of the foetal self, or a sound recording of the baby's in-utero heartbeat. These images and recordings can even be encapsulated in a bespoke piece of jewellery, ordered from an online boutique. For example, the website etsy.com offers bespoke 'Sonogram pendant necklaces' that display a printed picture of the baby from an ultrasound scan, combined with a digital sonogram of the baby's heartbeat that can be played at the press of a button, illustrating one of many ways in which this digital life may be expressed in tangible and audible form. If shared with family, friends and the wider social network, such content may help to kick-start the baby's social life, creating a social presence for it before physical birth. Once begun, the digital life quickly becomes a multi-faceted one, representing aspects of an individual's identity through the user's real name, and through pseudonymous and anonymous identities that are not necessarily tethered to the individual's physical identity (Foresight Institute 2013).

Taken as a whole, these multiple digital identities create a digital life constructed from the content that the individual creates or participates in, or that references them: photos, blog posts, emails, social media accounts, video, music and more. This content is scattered across multiple physical devices including smart phones, laptops and cloud storage, and multiple internet service providers (ISPs). Some of this content has value: financial, reputational, intellectual, emotional, practical. Online trading accounts (such as eBay) carry financial value from sales and purchases, but also reputational value through vendor ratings. Blogs and videos can have intellectual value. Photos may resonate with emotional significance – a first kiss, a new baby. Emails can contain important practical information. These types of value can persist even after physical life ends. Of course, much content is junk, with no value at all.

A digital ‘off’ switch?

The concept of digital death is even less precise than that of social death. There is no universal off-switch for digital death, no mechanism by which our physical death can be notified to ‘the internet’ as an overarching entity. As a result, we can linger on in cyberspace indefinitely. This inability to terminate our digital life is largely down to four factors, which are considered below: (i) the ease with which we can create content, (ii) the variable terms and conditions (T&C) of ISPs, (iii) the responsive, rather than proactive, nature of legislation and (iv) the complexity surrounding ownership of digital content. It is now far easier to create content than it is thoughtfully to curate it and reduce it to just those items imbued with value worth inheriting. In the past, the cost and effort of producing, sharing and storing analogue content was self-limiting. Buying film and developing photographs, writing letters by hand and posting them, photocopying office memos and delivering them to individual desks: these activities took time and cost money. When combined with the inevitable constraints of available physical storage, this meant that mediated content was limited and also subject to the occasional clear-out. Precious memories were actively curated out of necessity. With cheap data storage, there is no incentive to clear out old digital content, and no quick mechanism by which ‘precious’ digital content can be labelled as precious and hived off to a digital treasure chest.

The variable T&C of ISPs makes it extremely difficult for next of kin to ensure that the deceased’s online accounts are all shut down. The average computer user has 26 online accounts.¹ Next of kin may not know about all of these accounts. Even if they do, they may not know or be able to guess the passwords. Furthermore, ISP’s T&C may not permit account termination on death, although some of the most commonly used ISPs do have some process for responding to the physical death of an account holder. For example, Facebook will memorialise or remove an account if notified of the account holder’s death by next of kin. Twitter will remove an account, or assist family members in saving a backup of the deceased’s public Tweets on request. On eBay, ownership of trading accounts, user IDs and associated reputations cannot be transferred without the provision of explicit consent by eBay.²

Legislation is beginning to respond to the concept of digital death, but these responses vary globally and tend to be reactive rather than proactive. Article 17 in the EU Data Protection Directive includes the ‘Right to Erasure’. This argues for individuals to have the right to have content deleted at any time during their life *or after* on request, if it identifies them directly or indirectly. Comparing US states, there is also variation. In the US State of Virginia, legislation is specific in the case of the death of a minor: a personal representative has the power to take over the deceased minor’s online account. In the US State of Oklahoma, the Executor or Administrator of an estate can take over or terminate the ‘social media and certain other digital accounts of the deceased’ regardless of their age. The ability of personal representatives and executors in Virginia and Oklahoma to take over the digital accounts of the deceased foregrounds the question of post-mortem privacy. Digital assets have a ‘peculiarly personal and intimate character’ which is ‘difficult to categorise under current legal norms of property’.³ Advantages of taking over the accounts of the deceased may include gaining insight into their thoughts before they died – this is particularly relevant in cases where teens have committed suicide and there are suspicions of a causative link to online bullying by peers. However, the deceased may well have expected their online accounts and digital assets to remain private: taking over their accounts post-mortem does violate expectations of privacy, and those who take them over may discover previously hidden (and sometimes surprising) elements of the deceased’s life. The complexities created by inconsistent legislation worldwide, and by concerns over post-mortem privacy, are further exacerbated by the distributed nature of data storage, where the digital content associated with an individual may be stored around the world and controlled by multiple ISPs, subject to multiple legal jurisdictions.

Even if legislation and ISP T&C were simple and consistent globally, ownership of digital content is often unclear – making it almost impossible to erase an individual’s online identity completely. ‘Ownership’ is unclear because digital ‘content creation and management can often be seen as a collective effort’,⁴ leading to a kaleidoscopic series of ‘owners’ as an image is shared, edited and tagged repeatedly. A group ‘selfie’ of several teenage girls snapped on the smartphone of one of the subjects, then shared across social media sites, has a single photographer, but arguably multiple ‘owners’ who will expect a copy of it to share, edit and tag as they wish.

For all of the complexity described herein, the end of digital life may nevertheless happen quietly, when the living stop searching for the deceased online, with the result that the deceased drifts ever downwards in Internet search rankings, ultimately vanishing from view.

Lingering on in cyberspace: the post-self

If we do linger longer in cyberspace, what does this mean for our digital lives? Does our digital self remain dynamic after our physical death in the short-term? How long can we live on digitally? This extended digital self is a new form of the *post-self*, a dynamic, socially-constructed identity that remains after death, which has previously been considered in the context of social rather than digital life (Moncur 2014). The post-self – whether digital, social or a combination of the two – has much in common with reputation. It can remain dynamic after physical death, subject to change and based on input by others, both in the form of new content and in additions to the metadata surrounding original content – the data about the data. In the short-term, an individual can have the final say at their own funeral, choose the hymns, pick the photos for the order of service sheet, and even dictate the eulogy (Moncur et al. 2012). Apps that support such agency include LegacyOrganiser,⁵ which also enables users to record their memoirs and ‘Life defining occasions’. Do you want to send messages from beyond the grave to people in your life that you loved, loathed or betrayed? There’s an app for that too: for example, mygoodbyemessage.com will ‘*send your words and emotions to your family and friends after you are no longer able to*’. These posthumous interactions can serve to shape the memories that the living hold of the deceased in the formative period when grief is new.

Longer term, an individual’s digital life can be expressed with varying degrees of intensity. At its uncanny extreme, emergent services such as Eterni.me⁶ offer the prospect of an eternal, albeit artificially generated, presence:

Eterni.me collects almost everything that you create during your lifetime, and processes this huge amount of information using complex Artificial Intelligence algorithms. Then it generates a virtual YOU, an avatar that emulates your personality and can interact with, and offer information and advice to your family and friends after you pass away. It’s like a Skype chat from the past.⁷

This may sound comforting at first glance, but remember that such a service is entirely reliant on available digital content. A dystopian future looms, with your terse and perky Twitter self interacting posthumously with your grieving relatives in perpetuity, recommending interesting links and social commentary. Are chatty digital ghosts really a welcome addition to technological development?

LifeNaut.com, originating in the Terasem Movement Foundation, goes a step further than Eterni.me. It offers to store clients’ genetic material, ready for a transhuman future where ‘*technology may be able to grow you a new body via ectogenesis and your mindfile may be able to be downloaded into it, enabling you to live on indefinitely*’.⁸ The darker outcomes of such products were examined to uncomfortable effect in ‘Be Right Back’, a television programme in the Channel 4 *Black Mirror* series.⁹ They have also been the subject of bioethics debates on the rights of contemporary citizens to control their own minds and bodies, even if their choices make them something other than quintessentially human (Hughes 2004).

At a more prosaic level, digital media is already being used by the living to sustain the deceased’s post-self. This post-self is a social entity that changes over time. It can be made up of memories, mementos, memorials, reputations and other kinds of memory. For example, digital content created during the life of an individual may contribute to the post-self, repurposed as input to a memorial with a digital element (Moncur and Kirk 2014). The website MuchLoved.com¹⁰ is one amongst many online memorial sites which include digital photos and videos of the deceased from when they were alive, and creates opportunities for the bereaved to articulate their memories and affection in an ingoing manner. Similarly, one’s Facebook identity can act as a ‘persistent digital self’ and a ‘vivid everyday presence in mourners’ lives’, with loved ones posting messages to the dead and tagging photos of them – not just to remember them, but also to sustain an on-going conversation with the deceased and with other mourners (Kasket 2012).

It is easy to create a digital life, but hard to end it. We are now entrusting so many of our memories to the digital world, placing them within our digital lives. After we are gone, those memories may continue on in a life of their own.

Notes

¹ <http://www.techradar.com/news/internet/online-fraud-too-many-accounts-too-few-passwords-1089283>

² <http://pages.ebay.co.uk/help/policies/user-agreement.html>

³ Lilian Edwards and Edina Harbinja, 'Protecting Post-Mortem Privacy: Reconsidering the Privacy Interests of the Deceased in a Digital World' (10 November 2013), *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*, 32(1) (2013). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2267388> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2267388>

⁴ Thomas Olsson, 'Understanding Collective Content: Purposes, Characteristics and Collaborative Practices', in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Communities and Technologies (C&T '09)* (New York: ACM), 21–30. DOI=10.1145/1556460.1556464 <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1556460.1556464>

⁵ <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/legacy-organiser/id428518774?mt=8>

⁶ Eterni.me

⁷ <http://eterni.me/>

⁸ <https://www.lifenaut.com/>

⁹ <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/black-mirror/episode-guide>

¹⁰ http://www.muchloved.com/g_home.aspx